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ABSTRACT

Educators who are responsible for planning curricula in literature should wish to do so with a full respect for the diverse groups that comprise U.S. society. The current way of thinking about this problem in setting policy for literature instruction is in terms of the canon: that is, the traditional works and the order in which they are to be read. Education, by its very nature, is ethnocentric, and cultures are exclusionary and elitist by definition. However, recently cultural critics have challenged the monolithic nature of U.S. cultural elitism and the literarcy canon in particular. New populations have been accommodated by adding texts to the recognized "classics," and educators are being pressured to help speed up this evolutionary process. In U.S. society, canon formation is carried out by diverse forces, and is constantly being questioned and altered. Also, there is always a discrepancy between the official canon, the critical canon, and what is actually being taught and therefore read by students. Sustained controversy has marked attempts to foster more inclusion of minority and women writers. But a literature curriculum is not simply a matter of canon; it embodies a theory of the text and teaching. By adopting a broader view of literature and its teaching which values the cultural backgrounds of the text, the canon wars take on a different nature and can prove solvable. (Thirty-one references are attached.) (HB)

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2
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Demetrius of Phalerum, as keeper of the king's library, received large grants of public money with a view to his collecting, if possible, all the books in the world; and by purchases and transcriptions he to the best of his ability carried the king's purpose into execution. Being asked once in his presence, about how many thousand of books were already collected, he replied: "More than two hundred thousand, O king; and I will ere long make diligent search for the remainder, so that a total of half a million may be reached. I am informed that the Jews also have certain laws which are deserving of transcription and place in the library."

"What is to hinder them then," replied the king, "in this task? For all the necessary means are at thy service." And Demetrius answered: "Translation is also required. For in the Jews' land they use a peculiar script...." And when the king had learnt all the facts, he gave command that a letter should be written to the high priest of the Jews, in order that the proposal [of Demetrius] above mentioned might be carried into effect. (The Letter of Aristeas)

Educational Goals and Diverse Cultures

In this paper I will survey some of the issues that face those who must plan curricula in literature and who wish to do so with a full respect for the diverse groups that comprise our society. Although at one time we may have thought that the United States was a melting pot with the result of a single national culture, we have found that that metaphor does not hold and that it fails to respect even those groups that we thought had been assimilated. Our situation is not unlike that described in the epigraph, which treats of the world of letters at the time of the development of the Library at Alexandria over two thousand years ago. A close reading of that description tells us a great deal about our predecessors and ourselves. Like the Hellenistic peoples who first thought "the world" was Greek only, but who came to realize there were cultures other than the Greek, we have also found that the "western heritage" was an artifact that limited our perspective on the world. This situation has been paralleled in China and Japan as well as other societies. What may have worked for an age of insular nationalism without electronic media does not suffice in a global village where all inhabitants claim equal status.

The current way to think of this new vision in setting policy for literature instruction is in terms of the canon: What works are to be read by whom and in what order? I shall explore this notion in the first part of this paper, and shall attempt to show how this approach may lead to various dead ends. In the final part of the paper, I shall offer an alternative view that may be more pedagogically sound.

Education and Acculturation

As Torsten Husén (1990) has noted, education is, by its very nature, ethnocentric. From the very first schools of which we have knowledge to the present, the school system has been in the business of bringing young people into the local, regional, or national culture. For many systems, this function is most clearly realized in the fields of language and literacy study and of history, which is itself a consequence of literacy. Although there has been a recent tendency to think of literacy as a neutral skill, those who promote such a view neglect the fact that people learn to read and write texts and that texts are necessarily about something. Willy-nilly one learns a skill and acquires knowledge; such a truth was well known in Lutheran Sweden, 19th-century America, and Castro's Cuba. We deny it at our children's peril. Education in literacy and particularly literature and history leads people away from their individual or familiar past into something broader, a literate community with its own models and norms; it is the main agent of acculturation.

Culture has a variety of meanings, depending upon the bias of the definer; for the purposes of this paper I shall stipulate it to stand for a combination of: (a) a set of intellectual beliefs and social practices of a self-defined group of people, and (b) the arts that embody those beliefs. This group can be an ethnic or geographic group. It can also be a group that defines itself by gender, sexual preference, or some other characteristic. Edward Said has noted

"...culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play" (Said, 1984, pp. 8-9).

Any culture serves to distinguish its members from those of other cultures and any culture is elitist in some senses; as Said points out,

"What is more important in culture is that it is a system of values saturating downward almost everything within its purview; yet paradoxically culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to everything and everyone that it dominates" (Said, 1983, p. 9).

Cultures are exclusionary by definition; people who have a culture see others as outside, above, or beneath them; and certainly very few people transcend cultures to become cosmopolites.

Judit Kádár-Fülöp (1988) has written that there are three major functions of the literacy curriculum in school as a cultural instrument, and I shall adapt them to the particulars of the literature curriculum. The first of these functions is the promotion of cultural communication, so as to enable the individual to communicate with a wider circle than the home, the peers, or the village. Such a function clearly calls for the individual to learn the literature and lore of the culture, the texts valued by the culture. The second function is the promotion of cultural identity, which includes the accepting and valuing of those texts and the inculcation of a desire to have them remain as "classics." The third function of literacy education is the development of individuality. Once one has learned to communicate within the culture and developed a loyalty to it, then one is able to become independent of it. In terms of literature, after one accepts the cultural "classics," one can develop individual tastes and interests. Some societies do not encourage this third step.

Education fulfills these functions not without cost; again to cite the comments of Edward Said: "When

our students are taught such things as 'the humanities' they are almost always taught that these classic texts embody, express, represent what is best in our, that is, the only, tradition. Moreover, they are taught that such fields as the humanities and such subfields as "literature" exist in a relatively neutral political element, that they are to be appreciated and venerated, that they define the limits of what is acceptable, appropriate, and legitimate as far as culture is concerned" (Said, 1983, p. 21). Said, it should be noted, is writing as a scholar and Professor of English literature who is also a Palestinian and is recognizing the paradox in his own life. This paradox has been noted by many others who have grown up in a postcolonial world. We can see the irony in the letter of Aristeas and its many parallels across the globe today.

Recognizing Other Cultures

We live in a time when cultural definitions shift either through an influx of new cultural groups, the breaking up of larger polities, or the belated recognition of existing but suppressed cultural groups. Monolithic national cultures have been challenged by ethnic groups across the world. They have also been challenged by the self-definition of groups like women, by the arrival of new artists of mixed backgrounds, and by the very existence of a popular culture.

The educational solutions to this situation, which is more an ideological than a curricular issue, vary according to the ideological beliefs of those in power. In many parts of the world the issue is one of language policy, which is to say political policy (Foster, 1991). The options have included: A program planned to assimilate the new groups into the existing one, as was the case in the United States in the early part of the 20th century (Bell, 1965) and as seems to be the case in France and its colonies; a program designed to create a new unifying "culture," as is the case of Indonesia; a program planned to ignore the subgroup as uneducable as has been the case of the treatment of the Gypsies in countries like Finland, Hungary, and other European countries as well as Indonesia with respect to the Chinese; one planned to establish separate educational systems as was the case with many immigrant groups in the United States and can be seen today with a group like the Amish as well as in a country like Belgium which has evolved two school systems for the Walloons and the Flemish; or one planned to meet the demand on the educational system that it accommodate the new populations by including their culture in the curriculum and thus redefining culture. The last example is the situation in the United States today, and is paralleled in countries like Canada, New Zealand, and England. The situation in the United States and Canada, I believe, differs from that in Europe or England or in other former colonies because the dominant cultures in Canada and the United States are themselves immigrant cultures and they themselves are culturally and linguistically diverse. In the United States as well as other parts of the world, there the fact is that some of the minority cultures are what Ogbu (1978) calls "caste cultures," peoples who came or were brought as slaves or lower caste workers. Although they could be compared to the "guest workers" of Europe, I believe their status is actually quite different. The Turkish population of Germany views itself and is viewed as temporary residents; such was not the case of the African slaves or the Chinese laboring force.

To pursue the alternative of accommodating to the new populations rather than ignoring them, I would argue that the educational system has generally approached it by adding the classics of any newly recognized culture and thus changing the canon by evolution so that White American texts were added to British ones in the late 19th and early 20th century, and African-American texts to the American in the mid-20th century and so on. It is a slow process similar to the gradual addition to the British canon of colonial writers or to the French of the Francophone. The alternative that has emerged since the 1960s has been to create separate canons for various groups (the practice had occurred within the groups themselves but was often not recognized by the official curriculum as the Irish group lead by Yeats testifies). Educational planners are now being asked by many groups to speed up the evolutionary process, to incorporate the separatist movement into the official curriculum, or to do both. This demand comes under the umbrella term multiculturalism. The call for multiculturalism in the schools of the United States is one to include in significant numbers representative texts and authors that may be defined by ethnic membership, in particular Hispanic, African-American, Native American, and Asian.

To this group have been added women, and there have been voices calling for the inclusion of homosexuals and those with distinct physical characteristics. One should carefully note that the issue does not concern "world literature"; in that sense, for the United States, multiculturalism remains ethnocentric.

The practical issues raised by this call include problems of canon definition, problems of time, and problems of access to materials including such matters as cost and censorship. To my mind these issues can be separated for the purposes of discussion, but in the real world of the schools and curriculum making, they often impinge upon each other and combine in various ways to force decisions on teachers and curriculum planners that are other than what they would have in an ideal world. In making my arguments, I will focus primarily on the theoretical issues and on the United States situation, but will occasionally refer to that in Canada, England, and New Zealand, as well as some European countries of which I have knowledge.

The major theoretical issue that the various parties to the controversy argue is how to approach literature and its reading in the light of cultural diversity and of the structure of the curriculum in terms of how it is taught, not of what is taught. In making their various canonical decisions, they proceed to conceive of literature instruction in the same terms as when the canon was seemingly one.

Looking at the Canon Wars

As it has been portrayed, the overwhelming issue in the admission of "new" cultures such as the African-American, female, or Latino to the literature curriculum is that of the determination of the appropriate canon to represent a culture and how to place that canon in relation to the existing one. The questions surrounding a canon of literature are not new, and they have been ideological rather than pedagogical issues, or even literary issues as Northrop Frye has been so patiently telling us for over thirty years (Frye, 1957). There was the question of the canon of scripture in many religions, setting forth what is canonical and what is apocryphal. In his brilliant essay, Wendell Harris (1991) observes that despite the etymology of canon, Biblical canonicity is not an appropriate model for our thinking about literature. More important for our purposes were the issues surrounding the Library at Alexandria, that monument of Hellenistic Greece wherein all of the major Greek texts were collected as well as various works that were donated to it or which came from muniments left the library. To these were added many Jewish texts as well as those from other Eastern cultures; as the epigraph notes, the addition was not what was originally planned. It was a diverse and rich collection, and one of the problems facing the librarians was what to preserve, for much was on papyrus, a fragile medium. As Parsons (1952) has written,

Before Alexandria, men had considered Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as the greatest tragic writers and Homer as the greatest Epic writer, if not the greatest of all writers, and these, perhaps individual, preferences had a public approval. But it was apparently reserved for the scholars of the Museum-Library to select in their literary laboratory the foremost writers and to construct lists or canons of their selection. (p. 224)

The origin of the word canon means "rule or measure," so that the lists serve as criteria for selection rather than as fixed boundaries. The scholars made their selection, fallible as they were, and it remained, although added to from time to time, and it is from that canon that we know Greek culture, as well as what the Hellenes included from the "barbarian" world surrounding theirs. Archeology has given us a taste of what was not included (the Gilgamesh epic) either because unknown to or spurned by the scholars.

Every society and culture has a canon, that body of artistic works which are considered central to a

group's self-definition; some were formed as deliberately as that of the Alexandrian Library; others formed much more haphazardly. Petrarch and his successors formed the canon of Roman and later Greek literature by what they could salvage from monasteries and nunneries. Their success depended upon happenstance and the vagaries of the abbots and prioresses as well as the ability of the searchers to copy materials quickly before they deteriorated or were destroyed (Deuel, 1965). As Harris (1991) observes, there are several operating definitions of canon, each of which can be seen as the fruit of an individual or a group defining a body of texts that serves a particular function. In a sense, the term is as slippery as "culture." It may be cynically seen as what we believe should be read, viewed, seen, or listened to by those who would join us. What makes it problematic and political is that it has come to be part of a national debate on the nature of our society and the government's role in defining that society. It has become reified in a way that far exceeds the historical reality of what we know about canons.

How Canons are Really Made

In few cases is there a consensus as to what belongs in the canon, what is excluded, and what is marginal. The makers of canons include editors, reviewers, librarians, historians, and others concerned with the determination of what shall be known of a culture or a society. In our society, literary canons are determined by diverse forces; Janice Radway painstakingly describes canon formation among a group of midwestern women (Radway, 1984), who meet through a bookseller to determine the "classic" romances. Others have described the ways by which the canons of popular culture such as film, television, and music are created through combinations of market research and promotion. These too have the aspects of canons as do comic books and commercial juvenile and adolescent literature.

At times as in Radway's example, those who set a canon are members of a culture; often they are from without. Such is true of the Renaissance scholars and the later archaeologists who had to be content with what they could find and decipher. All we have of the "literary canon" of certain Mesopotamian cultures is a collection of tables of the price of corn. Let us hope that those who could read had something else to amuse themselves with and that mothers had other tales for their children.

Another group of external definers of a canon includes the folklorist-anthropologists who determined what they would preserve of various dying cultures and societies throughout the world. At times they made selections; most other times the selection was determined by their informants, who might have had many motives for their selection. We must remember that for many societies the very idea of recording folktales and folksongs is new, less than a century old; what is recorded is but the tip of an iceberg and it probably is not revealing of a full culture.

If we examine the body of texts from the past two centuries in the United States to select representative texts of a cultural group, we are again at the mercy of printers and booksellers, of magazine and newspaper publishers, and of the market place. Even in the "dominant culture," canon formation is about as scientific as the stock market or the top forty in pop records (itself a "nonce" canon, to use Harris's term). Whether it represents the best or the "classic," the most representative, or the popular is arguable. We know that in England, F.R. Leavis led a propaganda campaign to get Lawrence into the curriculum and Tennyson out of it; similar campaigns have been waged in this country. Scott, Hardy, and George Eliot have been driven out of the school curriculum by various groups. The inclusion of one writer is subject to fashion, and writers blossom and fade based on the taste of editors and teachers, not to mention students. Contemporary writers, particularly of children's and adolescent literature, are promoted and sold by cartels of publishers, reviewers, teachers, and librarians.

Canons are capricious human selections among artifacts and are subject to change as the criteria change. Matthew Arnold's list of the "best that has been thought or said" contains holes such as the works of the 18th

century. T.S. Eliot and Archibald MacLeish helped bring Donne and the metaphysical poets back into favor. Whatever approach to the literature curriculum one adopts, one is always subject to criticism on specific authors and titles, and one can never fix what is most important for young people to read from whatever heritage. A particular canon is probably not adequate to the culture at large nor even to the "elite" within that culture. Curriculum planners need to acknowledge and accept the limitation of what is selected; they should never be seduced into defending it as William Bennett and Allan Bloom did as the best and enduring monuments nor attacking it as being a monolith that excluded minorities, women, and homosexuals as some of the cures of Bloom and Bennett have done. Some texts and writers have greater staying power than others; that is about all we can say. Why they stay is partly a matter of intrinsic quality but mostly the result of fashion. Because of their staying power, they have had greater influence on other artists and on the culture. Curriculum planners should simply say: "These are the works that we think best represent and define the cultures of the world in which our students live and the larger world culture. The list represents our judgment and it is subject to revision."

Educational Time and Access to Cultural Materials

Our main concern in this paper is what Harris calls the "pedagogical canon": If we take Fowler's (1979) official canon to mean something like all the authors and titles in whatever reasonably comprehensive literary histories are standard at a given time and if we accept his definition of the critical canon as the texts most written about at the time, the list of works commonly taught in high school and undergraduate courses will be not only much shorter than the official canon but also unlikely to correspond exactly to the critical. (Harris, 1991, pp. 112-113)

The reason for the discrepancy stems from practical problems of canon implementation that include those of fitting new materials into a crowded school day and calendar. In colleges and universities, where the approach to the curriculum is that of the cafeteria, the problem is not great. Anyone can add a course and with perseverance turn it into a department. The primary and secondary schools are another matter. Legislatures continually mandate new topics to be inserted into the curriculum; they seldom mandate the deletion of a topic. If they talk about lengthening the school day or the school year it is to boost the amount of science and mathematics and not to allow teachers and students time to consider matters of culture. So those who plan the day to day lives of school find themselves having to use thinner and thinner shoehorns to make the shoe fit. As the demands for cultural inclusion mount, the school must take something out. But the teachers are often conservative and do not want to give up what they have been teaching. Teachers are particularly reluctant to work on interdisciplinary projects, a sad fact at all levels of education from the grade school to the graduate school; departmental and disciplinary tugs are much too strong. The plea that is often given for not taking a more active part in these efforts is time, daily time, yearly time, or time in the total program of education. To add works representing new canons to the existing course or to add new courses or units represents a disruption of time; innovators insist that time be sacrificed for a new look at the world and ourselves.

A current example at the college level can be seen in the new *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lauter, 1990; see also Edmundson, 1990). The anthology intends to be comprehensive and representative of cultural diversity, including Native American traditions, as well as Africana, Hispanic, Asian, as well as a broader representation of women and of new contemporary writers. As Mark Edmundson notes in his review, "The *Heath* aspires to be simultaneously an ideal political image of America, and a celebration of artistic achievement" (Edmundson, 1990, p. 1133). At the same time, it slights other American groups such as the Middle Eastern and Eastern European. The problem that this admirable anthology presents for the curriculum is that it contains about 6000 pages. How can that be fitted into a year's course, much less a semester's, at better than a sprint through the pages? It is likely that the faculty will select, and the selection may well fail to meet the compromise. As Harris writes, "Recent textbook anthologies have fattened noticeably in their editors' attempts to represent greater cultural diversity, but the length of the semesters has unfortunately remained the same" (Harris, 1991, p. 118).

The second set of constraints upon implementing programs that deliberately set out to introduce students to the canons of various groups either through separate units or the integration of these groups into a broader survey, is that of availability of materials. Many of the texts that would be taught in multicultural programs are relatively new; as such they present problems of permissions cost, availability, and censorship. The first of these is a problem for the publisher or editor who would create an anthology. The Heath volumes cost about \$50.00. I was editor of a 7-12 series in the 1970s that strove to increase the representations of African Americans, Latinos, women, and contemporary world literature. The series went out of print quickly, but I and my colleagues still owe the publisher about \$500,000 in permissions costs--most of it for the material I mention above. We, none of us, begrudge the authors receiving this money--but we doubted whether they would get it. Such costs, however, represent a major expense to a publisher and are daunting to editors and schools, for the increased cost must be shared.

The series went out of print quickly for the other reason that provides a curb on multicultural programs--censorship. Our series provided a target for the "religious right" which was just then flexing its muscle, and we were quickly put on the blacklist. The ostensible reason was not that we were publishing works by minority populations (although it was remarkable that the works cited for language, sex, drugs, violence, attacks on the police, and the like happened to be by African Americans, Native American, and Latinos both female and male). In part, many works of contemporary literature from various cultures touch upon contemporary topics and issues. Because these topics are so prevalent in our society, works that deal with them are paradoxically grist for the censor's mill. What many seem to tolerate on television and in the popular press, they will not tolerate in the schools. The problem for the editor and curriculum planner is how to deal with this paradox of our society. It is not a new paradox; Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley faced it and so did Wilde, each of whom is now "safe."

The issues of time, availability, and use of materials are real problems for the implementation of literature programs that seek to represent diverse cultures. They are tangible problems and manageable ones. The more intangible problems are those of purpose and program development, both of which are thorny and made more problematic by the practical issues to which I have referred in this section.

Parallelism or Integration in the Pedagogical Canon

In 1989, the New York Task Force on Multicultural Education issued a statement concerning the school curriculum which they titled "A Curriculum of Inclusion." Although it focuses on social studies, that report raises many of the issues that frame the curricular debate. The Task Force espouses a program that segments selected ethnic cultures into their own units or courses. It suggests a structure that would have a block of curricular time devoted to each group, particularly African and Hispanic, and would have each course taught independently. Opposed to this, is an approach that would seek to bring these different cultures under a single umbrella and teach them interdependently. This is what is proposed in California and in other settings.

What is suggested in the New York plan is what Diane Ravitch (1990) calls "particularism," which she sees as a deliberate attempt to divide the polymorphous American cultural democracy into a series of ghettoized cultures. She attacks such an approach on intellectual grounds, and sets up the integrated approach as a desirable solution to the curriculum. She believes it to be truer to an historical reality. The debate between Ravitch and her opponents over the New York plan is a debate about the curriculum in history.

When we transfer this debate to the literature curriculum in the elementary and secondary schools, we see, I would argue, difficulties in both options. The separatist approach presents grave logistical problems of who or what to include in whatever brief time is allotted; but then so does the integrated approach. The separatist approach tends to valorize particular minority cultures and denies the fact that literary texts from the "minority" cultures play against the "majority" culture as the poetry and drama of a writer like Baraka so clearly

shows. That being so, the students may be at a loss as to what is going on in those works. On the other hand, the integrated approach may fail to point out the specific cultural roots of a particular text. The debate concerning the approach to literature seems to me to be a debate among scholars rather than a debate among educators. It also seems a debate that may have some liveliness at the college level, but which is finally a nondebate since the college operates on the *caveat emptor* approach to curriculum, but which becomes obscure and precious when applied to the common school where everyone has to take everything.

The Futility of the Canon Wars

Both sides in the debate are elitist, urging an approach to the curriculum that seeks to teach some "canon" that emerges from the academy (usually the literary academy, although in the case of folklore, the anthropological academy also sanctions a canon). Against them stands the culture of the students, children who have been raised in the broader culture of television and other media that has an ambiguous relationship to either the traditional Euro-American or the valorized ethnic cultures. The media tend to homogenize culture into a world of The Simpsons, Madonna, Richie Valens, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jackson, and Vanilla Ice, a world where color, race, ethnicity, and gender are commodities. At times the works of these cultural figures play against a "school" culture of the traditional canon much as does the humor of Mad Magazine, Sesame Street, and Bugs Bunny. They allude both to the stalwarts of the traditional and some of the ethnic canons as well as to the canons of film, music, and television. Media culture has brought with it the merging of ethnic and cultural strands in food, dance, music, drama, and dress. Advertisers and producers change the color or the language of their commercials, but they do not change the content.

Such a broad culture is the culture of the students. It is the one they have been sold whether they live on an Amish farm in Illinois, a barrio in Miami, or a reservation; it has become internationalized as well. The school represents a culture distinct from these students and their families, no matter how the school tries to represent itself. School literature is distinct from many people's culture, no matter how hard it tries to present the heritage of the people in glossy courses whether separatist or integrationist. The texts presented represent a canon of "high" culture, not one of "mass" culture (I am using these two not as values but as indices of the source of the canon). Many students see school literature as "texts that teachers like." The school takes literature and makes it a matter of study and testing. The commercial culture makes no such demands on the students; they can become part of it, learn it, and even become experts in it without taking any tests, seeing coercion, or feeling the threat of failure behind the invitation to partake in it.

It seems to me that the debate over the canon and the curriculum is a debate in Laputa. The schools lie under that floating island in a world inhabited by people who read, listen, and view other materials that have been touched by, but are nearly independent of the ethereal culture of English, African, Hispanic, or Feminist studies. The world on the mainland is a multicultural world indeed; its inhabitants have all sorts of roots and histories. Those histories have been touched by the arts and the literature of the academy, but the cultural icons are popular and not academic. At the same time serious artists have their feet planted firmly in both the popular and the academic worlds; only a few in any society are so esoteric as to be oblivious of the world around them.

The schools of our society are asked to help people get in touch with the higher cultures and are often enjoined to criticize the popular culture. In responding to this request, the schools ride into the canon wars and get attacked by everyone. Those who attack with their feet and minds are the students to whom whatever literature the schools offer is simply a vehicle for testing and sorting. If it is to be read, it is not to allow them to explore the culture or the society of an ethnic group or of the broader world. It exists to be the object of searches for literal meaning or the springboard for the development of critical talk. It exists apart from the world outside of school and the culture that the students (and their parents) inhabit.

The canon wars are political wars that attack the schools and perhaps tear them apart. I question whether they will affect the lives and cultures of most of our students. The previous debates on the canon have had relatively little impact on the culture of our society; I doubt if this one will, but I think that the canon wars have raised a deeper issue: the nature of what is it we are about when we teach literature.

Looking at the Underlying Issues

A literature curriculum is not simply a matter of a canon. As I have argued for years (Purves, 1988; Purves, Rogers, & Söter, 1990), a literature curriculum embodies a theory of the text and seeks to do more than simply have students read works. They must talk, write, and otherwise display their responses to what is read, by expressing either their understandings, their attitudes, or their beliefs and judgments. As Kádár-Fülöp (1988) noted, the literacy curriculum seeks to promote cultural communication and cultural identification, to socialize and humanize students through the reading and discussing of texts, and these two goals exhibit themselves not only in what is read but the way in which it is read and understood.

Cultural Literacy and Acculturation as Issues Defining the Literature Curriculum

The following statement from the New York Task Force described earlier sets the terms of the issue of the ends of a multicultural curriculum.

A restructuring of the entire curriculum must be done not in a piecemeal fashion but rather in a fundamental manner to insure that the pluralistic nature of our society is clearly represented and that students of all [sic] cultures are properly educated. Aspects of cooperation and amicability among all cultures should be stressed over conflict and violence. (Sobol, 1989, p. 40)

The last sentence of the paragraph can be construed as saying that the literature as well as the history of the various cultural groups should deny the strife, oppression, and resistance that existed among and between them; history should be rewritten in order to affect the students' attitudes. A sharper example can be found in the executive summary:

The Task Force promotes the idea that all curricular materials be prepared on the basis of multicultural contributions to the development of all aspects of our society. Such a balanced, integrated approach is seen as serving the interests of all children from all cultures: children from Native American, Puerto Rican/Latino, Asian American, and African American cultures will have higher self-esteem and self-respect, while children from European cultures will have a less arrogant perspective of being part of the group that has done it all. (Sobol, 1989, p. 4)

Again the text clearly suggests that a major focus of the curriculum is to affect the beliefs and attitudes of the children, to "raise" or "change" their consciousness which is to say it is to acculturate the children. One can quarrel with the substance of the last clause which suggests--contrary to reality--that all European immigrant cultures share the arrogance of the Anglo-Saxon. Clearly, the intent of the curriculum is to effect a sea-change in ethnic and cultural attitudes and beliefs which I find frightening and as tyrannical an approach to culture as that of the Anglo-Saxon approach. However, the question I would raise here is less that of desirability of the goal than that of the feasibility of its success.

The formation of such a goal is based on the idea of literature's moral or affective force. Such a belief permeates American thinking about literature and is the basis for, among other things, censorship; it lies behind the recent trials of the Cincinnati Arts Center and 2 Live Crew. There has been some research on the capacity of literature to accomplish this goal: some of it has dealt with cultural attitudes, some with moral beliefs, and some with personal codes and attitudes towards issues such as death or divorce. The results suggest that the reading of literature tends to reinforce attitudes and beliefs rather than to effect conversions (Beach & Hynds, 1990; Purves & Beach, 1972). Such is also the position of reader-response theory which tells us that readers bring their heads and hearts to the text and create meanings rather than simply abstract them from the unvarying message of the text. The reader is not a passive recipient of the text and the cultural values it embodies. Research and theory, then, tend to cast doubt on the capacity of a text by itself to acculturate peoples to a culture that is not the one to which they are accustomed as filiated members or one about which they are predisposed to understand and appreciate.

On the other hand, there is a body of research that suggests that schooling, particularly schooling in literacy, has a strong influence on habits of mind and creates the mental conditions that help to define cultural practices (Langer, 1990; Purves, 1973, 1980, 1990). Being asked to approach texts the same way from the first day of school to the last, breeds a way of responding to texts that pervades an individual's outlook and that clearly can be seen as a cultural artifact. Similarly, by being exposed to only one type of literary text (such as rhymed poetry or stories that have but happy endings), students probably come to recognize these as somehow sanctioned and other kinds of texts as less sanctioned or as not being literature. The empirical evidence for the last point is not as clear as for the first, that dealing with type of response; yet it would follow that the two points have equal force. If students learn to see that one approach to a text is culturally approved, they can also learn to see that one form of text receives such approval. We do not know whether extensive exposure to texts from one culture can limit the vision of readers over time. But such is the argument for the cultural pluralists and it would seem to have some support.

How can we put together these two findings about acculturation that appear to be diametrically opposed? On the one hand, it seems clear that simply reading a few texts that show a culture in a particular light or that espouse a particular viewpoint will do little to affect the attitudes and beliefs of readers other than to reinforce existing beliefs; on the other hand prolonged exposure to a particular type of literature or a particular approach to literature will have an effect on the beliefs of students and readers.

Acculturation, it would seem, results from a deliberate and prolonged immersion into a culture; it cannot be accomplished on an hour-a-day basis for a semester. This being so, it would seem that if one is concerned with acculturation, one must look at the K-16 curriculum in reading, history, and literature, and determine what its potential long-term effects might be. To examine simply a unit, a course in the middle school, or the American literature curriculum in the 11th grade will not suffice. Second, one must reexamine the approach to text that imbues the curriculum, and it is here, I think, that the problem and the solution lie. If we do not change our way of teaching literature, then the goal of attitude change and indoctrination should probably be abandoned for the more modest one of introduction. It may be prudent to settle for teaching students about a culture such as the Native American, for making them aware of the depth and strength and pride of that culture, its uniqueness and its common concerns with other cultures. Surely such knowledge and appreciation cannot hurt those who are not Native Americans; and it will probably serve to reinforce the self-esteem of those who are.

The Double Vision: An Alternate Approach to the Canon Dilemma

I should like, however, to propose an alternative way of thinking about the problem that arises from the point I have just made. Although it will not go away, the issue of text selection cannot be divorced from that of the perspective by which one approaches literature. The current approach to the teaching of literature has,

paradoxically, led to the canon wars, and these wars have, as we have seen, confined themselves to the texts and to the ways in which the texts are read. The canon issues are issues of taste and ideology and such issues can never be resolved. To return to Said's criticism of the supposed neutrality of the current view of the humanities and the single canon, that view stems from an ideology that holds the text autonomous and the reader clever but ignorant.

The view of literature instruction in vogue in the United States for the past sixty years is one which views the literary text as detached from its author and its culture. In 1929, I. A. Richards suggested that the problem many students had in reading literature stemmed from the fact that they could not read poems when those poems were detached from author and history. To prove his point, he gave students poems without any external information, asked students to write about them, and showed the varied nature of their misreadings (Richards, 1929). One can argue that his experiment was doomed to success. Richards magnificently showed that many of the problems readers had resulted from lack of knowledge about the circumstances of the poem, from cognitive failure, and from the attempt to fit the text to various critical, emotional, and topical preconceptions. The result of his study was to lead critics and teachers to dismiss the first cause (ignorance) and to develop curricula which would help students read texts that they knew nothing about, and from whom background knowledge was barred. In the heyday of this approach, some poetry anthologies went to great length to hide the names of the authors from the reader so as to minimize the influence of knowledge.

At the college level, critics and teachers turned to a variety of strategies: the New Criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader-response theory, structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, myth criticism, Freudian criticism, and the like. In most cases these approaches took the famous triangle of writer--text--reader, and looped off the right-hand term. They took either objective or pragmatic approaches to criticism (Abrams, 1953). Varied as they may be they have all subscribed to the "authorless" text and the "ignorant but clever" reader. One of the most famous essays of the fifties attacked the "intentional fallacy," as leading away from the understanding of the text as a "verbal icon" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946). Terms have abounded for the authorless text: "persona," "implied author," "mask." They have also abounded for the innocent reader: "subjective criticism," "reader-response," "reading from context," "new critic." These ideas, concerning text and reader, filtered to the secondary school; For years articles in *English Journal* as well as more scholarly works have derided the presence of biographical information in the anthologies (in part because it is detached from the reading of the text). The idea of the authorless text has permeated even to the field of reading, where experts hold that the reader should determine meaning as one camp has it by "word attack," or as another has it by "gathering meaning from context." Even cognitive psychology has been text and reader centered with its limitation of "schema theory" to the reader's knowledge of the content and structure of the text rather than to the idea of the author and intention.

Into this framework, the importance of the gender and race of the writer has exploded along with the politics of culture. If the canon wars and their ideological frameworks become important, and if at the same time literature is to be taught within the ideology that holds that writers, canons, and cultures didn't exist, then the result is confusion. In reading and literature instruction as well as in curriculum, the focus has been on text and reader. Instead of the intentional fallacy, the current approach to criticism and teaching commits what I would call the *fallacy of anonymity*. It assumes that the text is a self-contained artifact which we can probe and analyze and which we can see in terms of our experience. The experience of the writer and the experiences which surround the text are immaterial because they are unverifiable. All we can verify is our individual and perhaps group experience of the object. Ignorance of history and culture, ignorance of the author and her world are the outcomes and the hallmark of the "good" reader.

The advocates of feminist, African-American, Hispanic, and other cultural studies to whom I have talked, however, are saying that such a view is myopic. As other essays in this volume proclaim, texts come from writers who inhabit cultural contexts which shape their writing. The text is simultaneously an individual aesthetic object and a cultural document, a part of the legacy of an individual and a group. The literature of a country is the

literature of men and women of all sorts of subcultures--racial, ethnic, national, regional, and local. Such texts should be read not as disembodied from their creators but as intimate parts of their culture. Reading the text is to read it in the light of what Hazlitt called the "spirit of the age" or of the culture. Such reading is to affirm in principle the distinction between what E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1976) called the "meaning" of a text, that which refers to the text in cultural and authorial context, as opposed to the "significance" of the text, that which we, distant from that culture, make of it. That Shakespeare "writ not for an age but for all time" must be recast as "Shakespeare wrote both for an age and for all time," so does Chinua Achebe, so does Margaret Atwood.

If we adopt a broader view of literature and its teaching, the canon wars take on a different nature. Special courses and departments have their place at the university, but in that arena that we call general education, it may be better to take a different approach. We should start from the premise that like other pieces of art, literary texts have creators who inhabit and half-create the various cultures of the world. If we remember that simple fact, then we have reinstated the author and we see that texts come from a context that is rich and complex; it can best be understood within that context. As we read the text, we build that context and we also use that context to help us read the text. We are not to be ignorant, but clever readers, relying on our own wits to come up with the clever interpretation. We are readers who strive to be more fully aware of the writer's world and the text's relation to that world. We make connections among texts and build our canons and examine the mosaic of cultures that constitute our world.

What is important in the curriculum, particularly at the secondary level is to provide a broad variety of texts from around the world (with some focus on the United States, but not a myopic view of even our own country that the Sobol report endorses). Such a view is that of Northrop Frye (1957), who held that all works of literature are to be held as equally valid, and that it is not the role of criticism or the schools to rank them. In one of his last writings he summarized his definition of literature:

...where the organizing principles are myth, that is, story or narrative, and metaphor, that is, figured language. Here we are in a completely liberal world, the world of the free movement of the spirit. If we read a story there is no pressure to believe in it or act upon it; if we encounter metaphors in poetry, we need not worry about their factual absurdity. Literature incorporates our ideological concerns, but it devotes itself mainly to the primary ones, in both physical and spiritual forms: its fictions show human beings in the primary throes of surviving, loving, prospering, and fighting with the frustrations that block those things. It is at once a world of relaxation, where even the most terrible tragedies are still called plays, and a world of far greater intensity than ordinary life affords. In short it does everything that can be done for people except transform them. It creates a world that the spirit can live in, but it does not make us spiritual beings. (Frye, 1991, p. 16)

In taking such a definition, we see that an individual work is a part of the totality of myth; at the same time it is situated in the world from which it came. This double vision must hold and must be taught.

In transforming this double vision to the curriculum, we must recognize the pressures of the world in which teachers and students reside. To be sure, there must be constraints to insure a breadth of selection from the totality of literature--Sappho to Narayan; tales of the First Nations of this continent to those of Stan Lee, Harper Lee, and Spike Lee. These works might be grouped at times by the cultures of the authors, but at times texts from disparate cultures might be yoked so they can be compared and contrasted. Both groupings help students learn to look at texts both as individual worlds of the larger universe of myth and metaphor and as written by people who have real lives and real backgrounds, and who express in manifold ways their culture, whether it be a mainstream culture or a marginalized culture, whether it be a culture of race, gender, sexuality,

or physical difference. We can read John Milton's poetry as the work of an Englishman, a defeated and disgraced Protestant radical, a man, and a blind person. All of these additions to our knowledge help us to see a work like *Samson Agonistes* more clearly than if we treated it as anonymous. But we cannot forget it is also part of the larger matrix of drama. We can make the same claim about Gwendolyn Brooks, American, African-American, woman, urbanite, midwesterner, caught up in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s both in the South, in Chicago and in its suburbs like Cicero. To know these facets of the poet is to help us read "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed." But we must also read it as a ballad, a poetic object.

In my own teaching of poetry at the college level, I have moved away from an approach that focuses solely on the students' naked responses to the texts, not that these are unimportant but that they serve to raise questions about the text and where it comes from as well as who it comes from. I now suggest that when they read a poem they should find out something about the poet and test how that knowledge brings them a newer or deeper understanding of the text. The course title is "Reading Poetry"; I have mentally changed it to "Reading Poets." We consider the gender and ethnicity of the poets and how that may affect their and our perspective on the subject. We have looked at Swift as an Irish poet in a London that had ground down his people, and at Yeats as an Irish poet in a different age. We have looked at Audre Lord as an African-American woman and a lesbian, at Leslie Silko as a Native American, and at Josephine Miles as a woman crippled by rheumatoid arthritis.

As a final examination I have given the students some poems by Ron Welburn and a portion of his essay on his writing and asked how reading the essay has helped them. Their responses made many different kinds of connections. One said, "The essay helped me see how bitterness can become art." Another wrote that although her feelings about them did not change, she could now "understand the poems more fully." Another mentioned the ways in which the essay made her look at the legends behind the poems. One connected the loss of culture in the poems to Welburn's personal statement of his attempt to regain it. Another found the essay led him to look at the storytelling elements in the poems. Another wrote of the ways in which the essay forced him to reexamine the imagery in the poem. One connected Welburn's poems to poems written by an Irish ancestor of hers who was forced off the land in the 19th century. Each of these and the others find that the information does not limit their response, but that it does make it deeper and, I suspect, more lasting.

I would argue that in order to celebrate the cultures of our world, it is not enough to have courses or units on these cultures and treat the texts as if the writer is nonexistent and as if the reader can look only at her response to the naked text. We must take off the mask of ignorance in our teaching of literature. We must not expect the naive reader to understand cultural difference if we treat all texts as contemporary, genderless, and mainstream. We must not fool ourselves with the fallacy of anonymity. To look at texts as the works of human beings who have a past and a culture is to see literature, ourselves, and our culture whole. The texts build upon other texts and they do indeed both emerge from and reshape a culture or a subculture. To adopt such a view is to make the canon wars recede; it may even help our students become serious readers of texts and the cultures from which they spring.

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